



Genital HPV and men who have sex with men (MSM)

There are more than 100 types of human papillomavirus HPV-- a very common family of viruses that cause warts on different parts of the body. These include the hands, face, neck, genitals, anus and areas around the genitals and anus. Genital and anal warts are caused by different strains of HPV than the ones that cause warts on other parts of the body. Genital HPV is usually sexually transmitted and is much more common in gay/bi men than in the general public. In fact, most sexually active gay/bi men probably have at least one strain of HPV.

The risks of HPV

Genital HPV is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD). The virus infects the skin and mucous membranes. There are more than 40 HPV types that can infect the genital areas of men (and women), including the skin of the penis, vulva (area outside the vagina), and anus, and the linings of the vagina, cervix, and rectum. Most people who become infected with HPV do not even know they have it. There is no cure for HPV, but in 90% of cases, the body's immune system clears the HPV infection within two years. HPV types 16, 18, 31, 33, and 35 are "high-risk" types and can lead to anal, cervical and rarely, throat cancers. "Low risk" HPV includes types 6 and 11 which can cause 90% of genital warts. Types 6 and 11 are not associated with increased cancer risk.

Symptoms of genital/anal HPV for men

HPV often has no symptoms. Sometimes, genital warts (also called condyloma) can appear on, or just inside the anus, and less commonly on the penis. Someone with HPV infection may not have visible warts-- but can still be infectious to others. Genital warts are generally painless and appear as bumps or growths that can be whitish, or lighter or darker than the surrounding skin. Genital warts that are hard to see can sometimes be felt as a bump.

HPV transmission for MSM

HPV that infects the genital areas is spread through sex-- or even close skin-to-skin contact with an infected partner. Someone can be infectious even without visible warts or bumps.

HPV prevention for MSM:

Beyond abstinence, avoiding visible warts is one way to limit exposure to HPV. Using a condom may only offer limited protection since the virus can transmit from or to areas of the skin not covered by a condom. Soap and water will not kill the virus, but may reduce risk. Bathing after sex may help prevent some HPV transmission. Having visible warts removed may help prevent transmission to others.

Genital or anal warts can be removed, but only by a medical provider.

HPV-related cancer prevention for men

Sexually active men who have sex with men should ask their medical provider about anal Pap smears. Like cervical Pap smears for women, this test takes a sample of cells and looks for structural changes that can be precursors to anal cancer. These tests can provide early detection—thereby potentially making treatment simpler and more successful.

HIV, HPV and anal cancer in MSM

HIV positive MSM may be twice as likely to contract anal cancers as are HIV negative MSM. As a person progresses toward an AIDS diagnosis, the risk increases. Despite the fact that HIV medication regimens can dramatically improve or maintain HIV positive people's health--the chances of developing anal cancer remains nearly double that of HIV negative people.

A final note

Transmission and risk factors vary from men to women, and on sexual practices. Please also read up on HPV and women.

A useful link:

<http://www.cdc.gov/STD/HPV/>